

PS 2331

.C7

Copy 1

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

BY

GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

HARPER'S
BLACK & WHITE
SERIES

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

PS 2331

Chap. Copyright No.

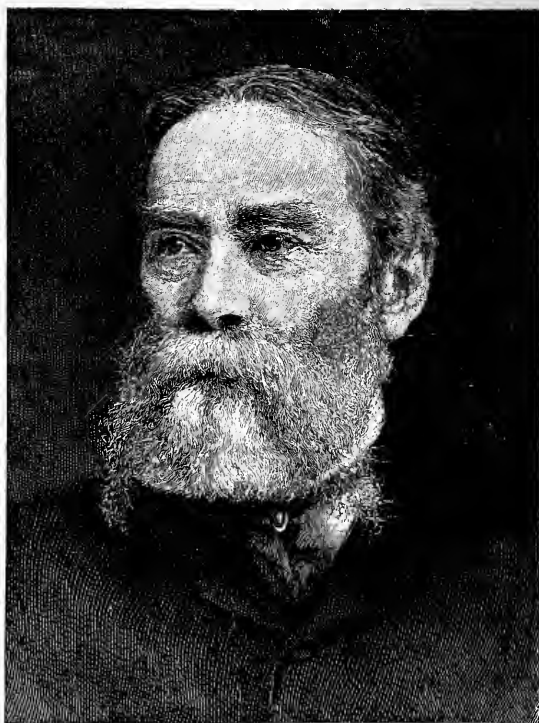
Shelf . C 7 .

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.







James Russell Lowell

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

An Address

BY

✓
GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS



NEW YORK

HARPER AND BROTHERS

1892

MAY 26 1892

17201 X

PS 2331
C7

Copyright, 1892, by HARPER & BROTHERS.

All rights reserved.

12-31717



IN the letter of Augustus Graham, the founder of the Brooklyn Institute, dated July 4, 1848, accompanying the gift of the property to the Board of Trustees, he says: "I give this sum with the injunction to your Board . . . that one-half of the net income from the buildings apply to the increase and keeping in order of the free library of the Institute, the residue of said income to be applied in part to the expense of an address to be delivered on the evening of the 22d of February, the birthday of George Washington, on the character of that great man, or of some other benefactor of America."

Mr. Lowell had hoped, should his health permit, to deliver the address on the 22d of February, 1892. Upon his death, on the 12th

of August, 1891, it was decided that, in accordance with the provision of Mr. Graham's letter, the annual address of this year should be a discourse in commemoration of Mr. Lowell.

March 1, 1892.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.



HE birthday of Washington not only recalls a great historic figure, but it reminds us of the quality of great citizenship. His career is at once our inspiration and our rebuke. Whatever is lofty, fair, and patriotic in public conduct, instinctively we call by his name; whatever is base, selfish, and unworthy, is shamed by the lustre of his life. Like the flaming sword turning every way that guarded the gate of Paradise, Washington's example is the beacon shining at the opening of our annals and lighting the path of our national life.

But the service that makes great citizenship is as various as genius and temperament. Washington's conduct of the war was not more valuable to the country than his organization of the Government, and it was not his special talent but his character that made both of those services possible. In public affairs the glamour of arms is always dazzling. It is the laurels of Miltiades, not those of Homer, or Solon, or Gorgias, which disturb and inspire the young Themistocles. But while military glory stirs the popular heart, it is the traditions of national grandeur, the force of noble character, immortal works of literature and art, which nourish the sentiment that makes men patriots and heroes. The eloquence of Demosthenes aroused decadent Greece at least to strike for independence. The song of Koerner fired the resistless charge of Lutzow's cavalry. A pamphlet of our Revolution

revived the flickering flame of colonial patriotism. The speech, the song, the written word, are deeds no less than the clash of arms at Cheronea and Yorktown and Gettysburg.

It is not only Washington the soldier and the statesman, but Washington the citizen, whom we chiefly remember. Americans are accused of making an excellent and patriotic Virginia gentleman a mythological hero and demi-god. But what mythological hero or demi-god is a figure so fair? We say nothing of him to-day that was not said by those who saw and knew him, and in phrases more glowing than ours, and the concentrated light of a hundred years discloses nothing to mar the nobility of the incomparable man.

It was while the personal recollections and impressions of him were still fresh, while as Lowell said, "Boston was not

yet a city and Cambridge was still a country village," that Lowell was born in Cambridge seventy-three years ago to-day. His birth on Washington's birthday seems to me a happy coincidence, because each is so admirable an illustration of the two forces whose union has made America. Massachusetts and Virginia, although of very different origin and character, were the two colonial leaders. In Virginia politics, as in the aristocratic salons of Paris on the eve of the French revolution, there was always a theoretical democracy; but the spirit of the State was essentially aristocratic and conservative. Virginia was the Cavalier of the Colonies, Massachusetts was the Puritan; and when John Adams, New England personified, said in the Continental Congress that Washington ought to be General, the Puritan and the Cavalier clasped hands. The union of Massachusetts and

Virginia for that emergency foretold the final union of the States, after a mighty travail of difference, indeed, and long years of strife.

The higher spirit of conservatism, its reverence for antiquity, its susceptibility to the romance of tradition, its instinct for continuity and development, and its antipathy to violent rupture; the grace and charm and courtesy of established social order, in a word, the feminine element in national life, however far from actual embodiment in Virginia or in any colony, was to blend with the masculine force and creative energy of the Puritan spirit and produce all that we mean by America. This was the consummation which the Continental Congress did not see, but which was none the less forecast when John Adams summoned Washington to the chief revolutionary command. It is the vision which still inspires the life

and crowns the hope of every generous American, and it has had no truer interpreter and poet than Lowell. Well was he born on the anniversary of Washington's birth, for no American was ever more loyal to the lofty spirit, the grandeur of purpose, the patriotic integrity; none ever felt more deeply the scorn of ignoble and canting Americanism, which invest the name of Washington with imperishable glory.

The house in which Lowell was born has long been known as Elmwood, a stately house embowered in lofty trees, still full, in their season, of singing birds. It is one of the fine old mansions of which a few yet linger in the neighborhood of Boston, and it still retains its dignity of aspect, but a dignity somewhat impaired by the encroaching advance of the city and of the architectural taste of a later day. The house had its traditions, for it

was built before the Revolution by the last loyal Lieutenant-governor of Massachusetts, whose stout allegiance to the British crown was never shaken, and who left New England with regret when New England, also not without natural filial regret, left the British empire. It is a legend of Elmwood that Washington was once its guest, and after the Revolution it was owned by Elbridge Gerry, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, who occupied it when he was Vice-president.

Not far from Elmwood, Lowell's life-long home, is the house which is doubly renowned as the headquarters of Washington and the home of Longfellow. Nearer the colleges stands the branching elm—twin heir with the Charter Oak of patriotic story—under which Washington took command of the revolutionary army. Indeed, Cambridge is all revolutionary ground, and rich with revolutionary tra-

dition. Lexington common is but six miles away. Along the West Cambridge road galloped Paul Revere to Concord. Yonder marched the militia to Bunker Hill. Here were the quarters in which Burgoyne's red coats were lodged after the surrender at Saratoga. But peaceful among the storied scenes of war stands the university, benign mother of educated New England, coeval with the Puritan settlement which has given the master impulse to American civilization.

The American is fortunate who, like Lowell, is born among such historic scenes and local associations, and to whose cradle the good fairy has brought the gift of sensitive appreciation. His birthplace was singularly adapted to his genius and his taste. The landscape, the life, the figures of Cambridge constantly appear both in his prose and verse, but he lays little stress upon the historic reminiscence. It

is the picturesqueness, the character, the humor of the life around him which attract him. This apparent indifference to the historic charm of the neighborhood is illustrated in a little story that Lowell tells of his first visit to the White Mountains. In the Franconia Notch he stopped to chat with a recluse in a saw-mill busy at work, and asked him the best point of view for the Old Man of the Mountain. The busy workman answered: "Dun no; never see it." Lowell continues, "too young and too happy to feel or affect the Juvenalian indifference I was sincerely astonished, and I expressed it. The log-compelling man attempted no justification, but after a little while asked, 'Come from Bawsn?' 'Yes,' with peculiar pride. 'Goodle to see in the vicinity of Bawsn?' 'Oh, yes,' I said. 'I should like—awl I should like to stan' on Bunker Hill. You've been there often, like-

ly?' 'No-o,' unwillingly seeing the little end of the horn in clear vision at the terminus of this Socratic perspective. 'Awl, my young fren' you've larned now that wut a man kin see any day he never does see; nawthin pay, nawthin vally!'"

Lowell entered college at fifteen and graduated at nineteen, in 1838. His literary taste and talent were already evident, for in literature even then he was an accomplished student, and he was the poet of his class, although at the close of his last year he was rusticated at Concord, a happy exile, where he saw Emerson, and probably Henry Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, who was often a guest in Emerson's house. It was here that he wrote the class poem which gave no melodious hint of the future man, and disclosed the fact that this child of Cambridge, although a student, was as yet wholly uninfluenced by the moral and intellectual

agitation called derisively transcendentalism.

Of this agitation John Quincy Adams writes in his diary in 1840: "A young man named Ralph Waldo Emerson, a son of my once-loved friend William Emerson, and a classmate of my lamented son George, after failing in the every-day avocation of a Unitarian preacher and school-master, starts a new doctrine of transcendentalism ; declares all the old revelations superannuated and worn out, and announces the approach of new revelations and prophecies. Garrison and the non-resistant Abolitionists, Brownson and the Marat Democrats, phrenology and animal magnetism all come in, furnishing each some plausible rascality as an ingredient for the bubbling cauldron of religion and politics." There could be no better expression of the bewildered and indignant consternation with which

the old New England of fifty years ago regarded the awakening of the newer New England, of which John Quincy Adams himself was to be a characteristic leader, and which was to liberalize still further American thought and American politics, enlarging religious liberty, and abolishing human slavery. Like other Boston and Harvard youth of about his time, or a little earlier, Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, Edmund Quincy, Lothrop Motley, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Lowell seemed to be born for studious leisure or professional routine, as yet unheeding and unconscious of the real forces that were to mould his life. Of these forces the first and the most enduring was an early and happy passion for a lovely and high-minded woman who became his wife—the Egeria who exalted his youth and confirmed his noblest aspirations; a heaven-eyed counsellor of the serener air

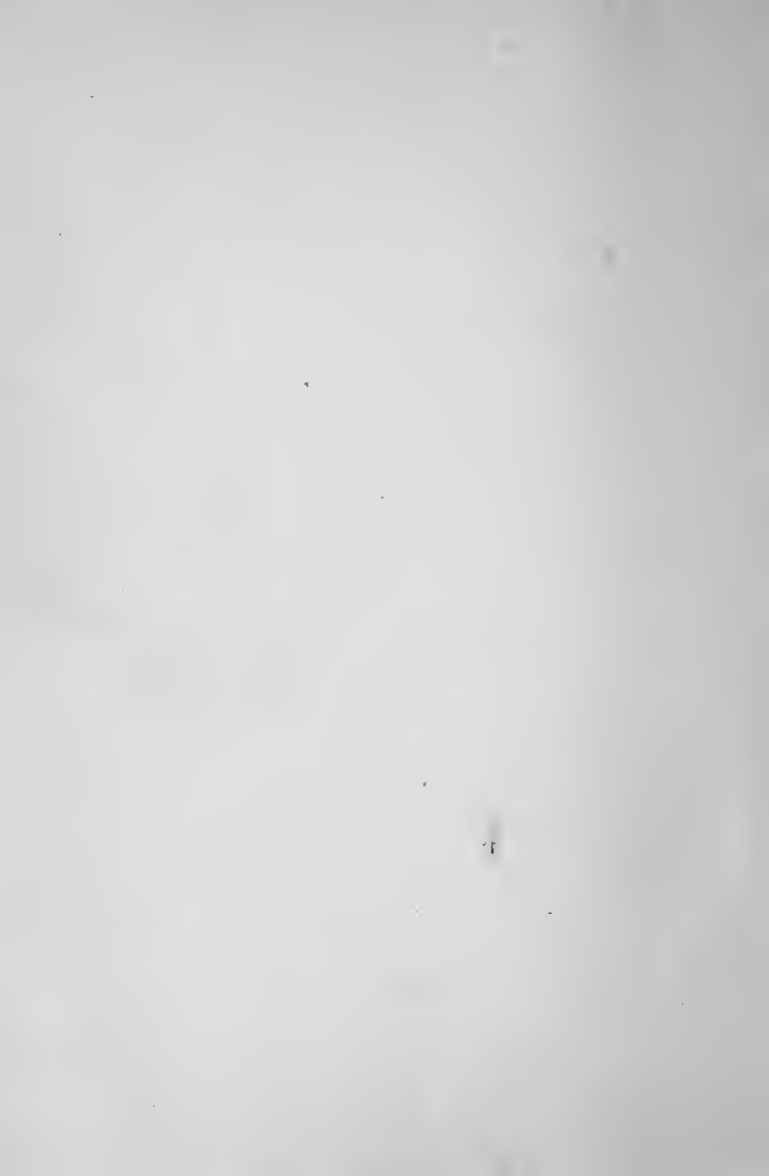
who filled his mind with peace and his life with joy.

During these years Lowell greatly impressed his college comrades, although no adequate literary record of the promise which they felt survives. When he left college and studied law the range of his reading was already extraordinarily large, and his observation of nature singularly active and comprehensive. His mind and memory, like the Green Vaults of Dresden, were rich with treasures accumulated from every source. But his earliest songs echoed the melodies of other singers and foretold no fame. They were the confused murmuring of the bird while the dawn is deepening into day. Partly his fastidious taste, his conservative disposition, and the utter content of happy love, lapped him in soft Lydian airs which the angry public voices of the time did not disturb. But it was soon clear that

the young poet whose early verses sang only his own happiness would yet fulfil Schiller's requirement that the poet shall be a citizen of his age as well as of his country.

One of his most intimate friends, the late Charles F. Briggs, for many years a citizen of Brooklyn, and known in the literary New York of forty years ago as Harry Franco, said of him, with fine insight, that Lowell was naturally a politician, but a politician like Milton—a man, that is to say, with an instinctive grasp of the higher politics, of the duties and relations of the citizen to his country, and of those moral principles which are as essential to the welfare of States as oxygen to the breath of human life. “He will never narrow himself to a party which does not include mankind,” said his friend, “nor consent to dally with his muse when he can invoke her aid in the cause of the

Then from the honey-suckle spray
The oriole, with experienced quest,
Twirls the fibrous bark away,
The cordage of his hammock-roof,
Then jumps by turns to show a note
Rich as the orange of his throat.



oppressed and suffering." This was the just perception of affectionate intimacy. It foretold not only literary renown but patriotic inspiration, and consequent political influence in its truest and most permanent form. In Lowell's mind, as in Milton's, as in the spirit of the great Dutch revolt against Spain, of the later German defiance of Napoleon, and of the educated young heroes of union and liberty in our own Civil War, the words of Sir Philip Sidney to Hubert Languet presently glowed with quickening truth: "To what purpose should our thought be directed to various kinds of knowledge unless room be afforded for putting it into practice so that public advantage may be the result." It was not a Puritan nor a republican who wrote the words, but they contain the essential spirit of Puritan statesmanship and scholarship on both sides of the ocean.

The happy young scholar at Elmwood, devoted to literature and love, and unheeding the great movement of public affairs, showed from time to time that beneath the lettered leisure of his life there lay the conscience and moral virility that give public effect to genius and accomplishment. Lowell's development as a literary force in public affairs is unconsciously and exquisitely portrayed in the prelude to *Sir Launfal* in 1848.

"Over his keys the musing organist
Beginning doubtfully and far away,
First lets his fingers wander as they list,
And builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay;
Then as the touch of his loved instrument
Gives hope and fervor, nearer draws his theme,
First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent
Along the wavering vista of his dream."

In 1884-45 his theme was no longer doubtful or far away. Although Mr. Garrison and the early abolitionists refused

to vote, as an act sanctioning a government which connived at slavery, yet the slavery question had already mastered American politics. In 1844 the Texas controversy absorbed public attention, and in that and the following year Lowell's poems on Garrison, Phillips, Giddings, Palfrey, and the capture of fugitive slaves near Washington, like keen flashes leaping suddenly from a kindling pyre, announced that the antislavery cause had gained a powerful and unanticipated ally in literature. These poems, especially that on "The Present Crisis," have a Tyrtean resonance, a stately rhetorical rhythm, that make their dignity of thought, their intense feeling, and picturesque imagery, superbly effective in recitation. They sang themselves on every antislavery platform. Wendell Phillips winged with their music and tipped with their flame the darts of his fervid appeal

and manly scorn. As he quoted them with suppressed emotion in his low, melodious, penetrating voice, the white plume of the resistless Navarre of eloquence gained loftier grace, that relentless sword of invective a more flashing edge.

The last great oration of Phillips was the discourse at Harvard University on the centenary of the Phi Beta Kappa. It was not the least memorable in that long series of memorable orations at Harvard of which the first in significance was Buckminster's in 1809, and the most familiar was Edward Everett's in 1824, its stately sentences culminating in the magnificent welcome to Lafayette who was present. It was the first time that Phillips had been asked by his Alma Mater to speak at one of her festivals, and he rightly comprehended the occasion. He was never more himself, and he held an

audience culled from many colleges and not predisposed to admire, in shuddering delight by the classic charm of his manner and the brilliancy of his unsparing censure of educated men as recreant to political progress. The orator was nearly seventy years old. He was conscious that he should never speak again upon a greater occasion nor to a more distinguished audience, and as his discourse ended, as if to express completely the principle of his own life and of the cause to which it had been devoted, and the spirit which alone could secure the happy future of his country if it was to justify the hope of her children, he repeated the words of Lowell :

“ New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient
good uncouth.

They must upward still and onward who would keep
abreast of truth.

Lo ! before us gleam her camp fires, we ourselves
must pilgrims be,

Launch our Mayflower and steer boldly through the
desperate winter sea.

Nor attempt the Future's portal with the Past's blood-
rusted key."

When Lowell wrote the lines he was twenty-five years old. He was thoroughly stirred by the cause which Edmund Quincy in reply to Motley's question, "What public career does America offer?" had declared to be "the noblest in the world." But Lowell felt that he was before all a poet. When he was twenty-seven he wrote, "If I have any vocation it is the making of verse. When I take my pen for that, the world opens itself ungrudgingly before me; everything seems clear and easy, as it seems sinking to the bottom would be, as one leans over the edge of his boat in one of those dear coves at Fresh Pond. But when I do prose it is *invita Minerva*. I feel as if I were wasting time and keeping back my

message. My true place is to serve the cause as a poet. Then my heart leaps before me into the conflict." Already the musing organist had ceased to dream, and he was about to strike a chord in a strange and unexpected key, and with a force to which the public conscience would thrill in answer.

Lowell was an intense New Englander. There is no finer figure of the higher Puritan type. The New England soil from which he sprang was precious to him. The New England legend, the New England language, New England character and achievement, were all his delight and familiar study. Nobody who could adequately depict the Yankee ever knew him as Lowell knew him, for he was at heart the Yankee that he drew. The Yankee early became the distinctive representative of America. He is the Uncle Sam of comedy and caricature. Even the

sweet-souled Irving could not resist the universal laugh, and gave it fresh occasion by his portrait of Ichabod Crane. Those who preferred the cavalier and courtier as a national type, traced the Yankee's immediate descent from the snivelling, sanctimonious, and crafty zealots of Cromwell's parliament. Jack Downing and Sam Slick, the coarser farces and stories broadly exaggerated this conception, and, in our great controversy of the century, the antislavery movement was derided as the superserviceable, sneaking fanaticism of the New England children of Tribulation Wholesome and Zeal-in-the-land-Busy, whom the southern sons of gallant cavaliers and gentlemen would teach better morals and manners. The Yankee was made a byword of scorn, and identified with a disturber of the national peace and the enemy of the glorious Union. Many a responsible citizen, many

a prosperous merchant in New York and Boston and Philadelphia, many a learned divine, whose honor it was that they were Yankees, felt a half-hearted shame in the name, and grudged the part played by their noses in the conversation. They seemed perpetually to hear a voice of contempt saying, "Thy nose bewrayeth thee."

This was the figure which, with the instinct of genius, with true New England pride and the joy of conscious power, Lowell made the representative of liberty-loving, generous, humane, upright, wise, conscientious, indignant America. He did not abate the Yankee a jot or a tittle. He magnified his characteristic drawl, his good-natured simplicity, his provincial inexperience. But he revealed his unbending principle, his supreme good-sense, his lofty patriotism, his unquailing courage. He scattered the clouds of hatred and ignorance that deformed and

caricatured him, and showed him in his daily habit as he lived, the true and worthy representative of America, with mother wit preaching the gospel of Christ, and in plain native phrase applying it to a tremendous public exigency in Christian America. The Yankee dialect of New England, like the Yankee himself, had become a jest of farce and extravaganza. But, thoroughly aroused, Lowell grasped it as lightly as Hercules his club, and struck a deadly blow at the Hydra that threatened the national life. Burns did not give to the Scottish tongue a nobler immortality than Lowell to the dialect of New England.

In June, 1846, the first Biglow paper, which, in a letter written at the time, Lowell called "a squib of mine," was published in the *Boston Courier*. That squib was a great incident both in the history of American literature and politics. The



serious tone of our literature from its grave colonial beginning had been almost unbroken. The rollicking laugh of Knickerbocker was a solitary sound in our literary air until the gay note of Holmes returned a merry echo. But humor as a literary force in political discussion was still more unknown, and in the fierce slavery controversy it was least to be anticipated. Banter in so stern a debate would seem to be blasphemy, and humor as a weapon of antislavery warfare was almost inconceivable. The letters of Major Jack Downing, a dozen years before the *Biglow Papers*, were merely political extravaganza to raise a derisive laugh. They were fun of a day and forgotten. Lowell's humor was of another kind. It was known to his friends, but it was not a characteristic of Lowell the author. In his early books there is no sign of it. It was not a humorist whom the good-

natured Willis welcomed in his airy way, saying that posterity would know him as Russell Lowell. Willis thought, perhaps, that another dainty and graceful trifler had entered the charmed circle of literature that pleases but not inspires.

But suddenly, and for the first time, the absorbing struggle of freedom and slavery for control of the Union was illuminated by a humor radiant and piercing, which broke over it like daylight, and exposed relentlessly the sophistry and shame of the slave power. No speech, no plea, no appeal was comparable in popular and permanent effect with this pitiless tempest of fire and hail, in the form of wit, argument, satire, knowledge, insight, learning, common-sense, and patriotism. It was humor of the purest strain, but humor in deadly earnest. In its course, as in that of a cyclone, it swept all before it—the press, the Church, criticism, schol-

arship—and it bore resistlessly down upon the Mexican War, the pleas for slavery, the Congressional debates, the conspicuous public men. Its contemptuous scorn of the public cowardice that acquiesced in the aggressions of the slave power startled the dormant manhood of the North and of the country.

“The North hain’t no kind of business with nothin’,
An’ you’ve no idee how much bother it saves,
We ain’t none riled by their frettin’ and frothin’,
We’re used to layin’ the string on our slaves,
Sez John C. Calhoun, sez he.
Sez Mister Foote,
I should like to shoot
The holl gang, by the great horn spoon, sez he.

“The mass ough’ to labor an’ we lay on soffies,
That’s the reason I want to spread Freedom’s aree.
It puts all the cunningest on us in office,
An’ reelizes our Maker’s orig’nal idee,
Sez John C. Calhoun, sez he.
That’s as plain, sez Cass,
As that some one’s an ass,
It’s ez clear as the sun is at noon, sez he.

"Now don't go to say I'm the friend of oppression,
But keep all your spare breath for coolin' your
broth;
For I allers hev strove (at least that's my impression)
To make cussed free with the rights of the North,
Sez John C. Calhoun, sez he.
Yes, sez Davis of Miss,
The perfection o' bliss
Is in skinning that same old coon, sez he."

Such lines, as with a stroke of lightning, were burned into the hearts and conscience of the North. Read to-day, they recall, as nothing else can recall, the intensity of the feeling which swiftly flamed into civil war.

Apart from their special impulse and influence, the *Biglow Papers* were essentially and purely American. It is sometimes said that the best American poetry is only English poetry written on this side of the ocean. But the *Biglow Papers* are as distinctively American as "Tam o' Shanter" is Scotch or the "Divine Comedy"

Italian. They could have been written nowhere else but in Yankee New England by a New England Yankee. With *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they are the chief literary memorial of the contest—a memorial which, as literature, and for their own delight, our children's children will read, as we read to-day the satires that scourge the long-vanished Rome which Juvenal knew, and the orations of Burke that discuss long-perished politics. So strong was Lowell's antislavery ardor that he proudly identified himself with the Abolitionists. Simultaneously with the publication of the first series of the *Biglow Papers*, he became a corresponding editor with Edmund Quincy of the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, the organ of the American Antislavery Society, and in a letter to his friend, Sydney Howard Gay, the editor of the paper, he says: "I was not only willing but desirous that my name should

appear, because I scorned to be indebted for any share of my modicum of popularity to my abolitionism without incurring at the same time whatever odium might be attached to a complete identification with a body of heroic men and women whom not to love and admire would prove me to be unworthy of those sentiments, and whose superiors in all that constitutes true manhood and womanhood I believe never existed."

But his antislavery ardor was far from being his sole and absorbing interest and activity. Lowell's studies, more and more various and incessant, were so comprehensive that if not like Bacon, all knowledge, yet he took all literature for his province, and in 1855 he was appointed to the chair of modern languages and belles-lettres in Harvard University, succeeding Longfellow and Ticknor, an illustrious group of American scholars which

gives to that chair a distinction unparalleled in our schools. His love and mastery of books were extraordinary, and his devotion to study so relentless, that in those earlier years he studied sometimes fourteen hours in the day, and pored over books until his sight seemed to desert him. But it was no idle or evanescent reading. Probably no American student was so deeply versed in the old French romance, none knew Dante and the Italians more profoundly ; German literature was familiar to him, and perhaps even Ticknor in his own domain of Spanish lore was not more a master than Lowell. The whole range of English literature, not only its noble Elizabethan heights, but a delightful realm of picturesque and unfrequented paths, were his familiar park of pleasure. Yet he was not a scholarly recluse, a pedant, or a bookworm. The student of books was no less so acute

and trained an observer of nature, so sympathetic a friend of birds and flowers, so sensitive to the influences and aspects of out-of-door life, that as Charles Briggs with singular insight said that he was meant for a politician, so Darwin with frank admiration said that he was born to be a naturalist. He was as much the contented companion of Izaak Walton and White of Selborne as of Donne or Calderon. His social sympathies were no less strong than his fondness for study, and he was the most fascinating of comrades. His extraordinary knowledge, whether of out-door or of in-door derivation, and the racy humor in which his knowledge was fused, overflowed his conversation. There is no historic circle of wits and scholars, not that of Beaumont and Ben Johnson where, haply, Shakespeare sat, nor Pope's, nor Dryden's, nor Addison's, nor Dr. Johnson's Club, nor

that of Edinburgh ; nor any Parisian salon or German study, to which Lowell's abundance would not have contributed a golden drop and his glancing wit a glittering repartee. It was not of reading, merely, it was of the reading of a man of Lowell's intellectual power and resource that Bacon said, "reading maketh a full man."

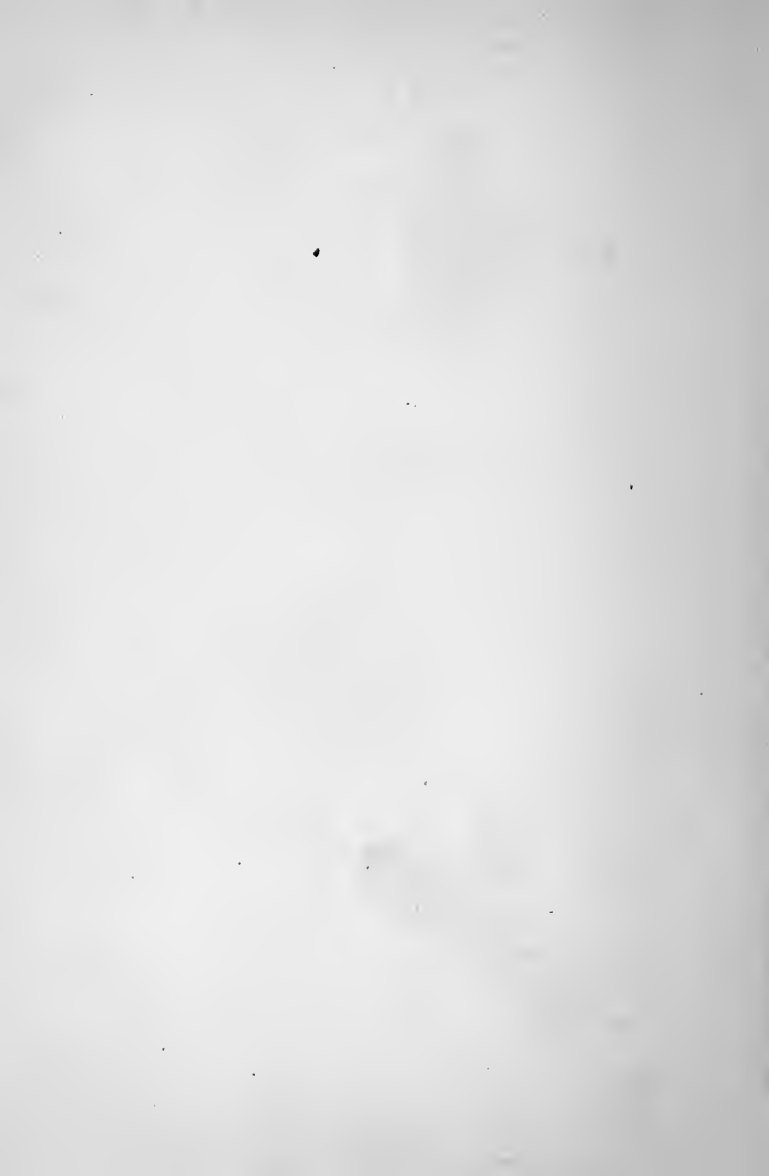
He had said in 1846 that it was as a poet that he could do his best work. But the poetic temperament and faculty do not exclude prose, and like Milton's swain, "he touched the tender stops of various quills." The young poet early showed that prose would be as obedient a familiar to his genius as the tricky Ariel of verse. Racy and rich, and often of the most sonorous or delicate cadence, it is still the prose of a poet and a master of the differences of form. His prose indeed is often profoundly poetic—that is, quick with imagination, but always in the form of prose,

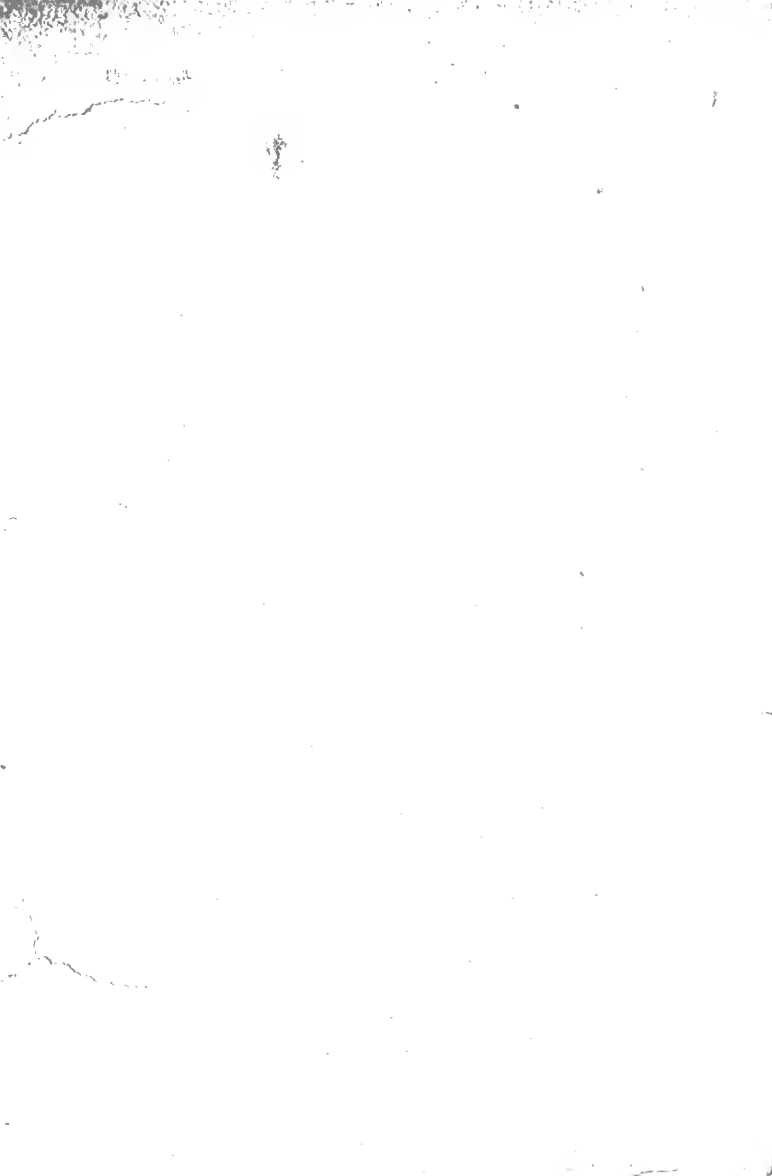
not of poetry. It is so finely compact of illustration, of thought and learning, of wit and fancy and permeating humor, that his prose page sparkles and sways like a phosphorescent sea. "Oblivion," he says, "looks in the face of the Grecian muse only to forget her errand." And again: "the garnerers of Sicily are empty now, but the bees from all climes still fetch honey from the tiny garden-plot of Theocritus." Such concentrated sentences are marvels of felicity, and, although unmetred, are as exquisite as songs.

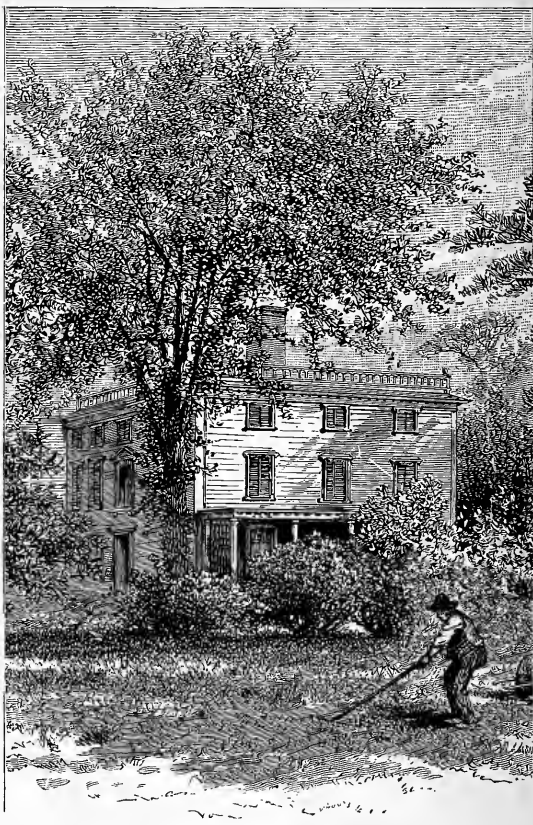
Charles Emerson said of Shakespeare, "he sat above this hundred-handed play of his imagination pensive and conscious," and so Lowell is remembered by those who knew him well. Literature was his earliest love and his latest delight, and he has been often called the first man of letters of his time. The phrase is vague,











HOME OF JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, CAMBRIDGE
MASSACHUSETTS

but it expresses the feeling that while he was a poet and a scholar and a humorist and a critic, he was something else and something more. The feeling is perfectly just. Living all summer by the sea, we watch with fascinated eyes the long-flowing lines, the flash and gleam of multitudinous waters, but beneath them all is the mighty movement of unfathomed ocean, on whose surface only these undulating splendors play. Literature, whether in prose or verse, was the form of Lowell's activity, but its master impulse was not æsthetic but moral. When the activities of his life were ended, in a strain of clear and tender reminiscence he sang :

“I sank too deep in the soft-stuffed repose,
That hears but rumors of earth's wrongs and woes;
Too well these Capuas could my muscles waste,
Not void of toils, but toils of choice and taste.
These still had kept me could I but have quelled,
The Puritan drop that in my veins rebelled.”

Literature was his pursuit, but patriotism was his passion. His love of country was that of a lover for his mistress. He resented the least imputation upon the ideal America, and nothing was finer than his instinctive scorn for the pinchbeck patriotism which brags and boasts and swaggers, insisting that bigness is greatness, and vulgarity simplicity, and the will of a majority the moral law. No man perceived more shrewdly the American readiness of resource, the Yankee good-nature, and the national rectitude. But he was not satisfied with an easy standard. To him the best, not the thriftiest, was most truly American. Lowell held that of all men the American should be master of his boundless material resources, not their slave, worthy of his unequalled opportunities, not the sycophant of his fellow Americans nor the victim of national conceit. No man re-

joiced more deeply over our great achievements or celebrated them with ampler or prouder praise. He delighted with Yankee glee in our inventive genius and restless enterprise, but he knew that we did not invent the great muniments of liberty, trial by jury, the habeas corpus, constitutional restraint, the common school, of all which we were common heirs with civilized Christendom. He knew that we have Niagara and the prairies and the Great Lakes, and the majestic Mississippi; but he knew also with another great American that

“Earth proudly wears the Parthenon
As the best gem upon her zone.
And morning opes with haste her lids
To gaze upon the Pyramids.”

As he would not accept a vulgar caricature of the New Englander as a Yankee, so he spurned Captain Bobadil as a type of the American, for he knew that a na-

tion may be as well-bred among nations as a gentleman among gentlemen, and that to bully weakness or to cringe to strength are equally cowardly, and therefore not truly American.

Lowell's loftiest strain is inspired by this patriotic ideal. To borrow a German phrase from modern musical criticism, it is the *leit motif* which is constantly heard in the poems and the essays, and that inspiration reached its loftiest expression, both in prose and poetry, in the discourse on Democracy and the Commemoration ode. The genius of enlightened Greece breathes audibly still in the oration of Pericles on the Peloponnessian dead. The patriotic heart of America throbs forever in Lincoln's Gettysburg address. But nowhere in literature is there a more magnificent and majestic personification of a country whose name is sacred to its children, nowhere a profounder passion

of patriotic loyalty, than in the closing lines of the Commemoration ode. The American whose heart, swayed by that lofty music, does not thrill and palpitate with solemn joy and high resolve, does not yet know what it is to be an American.

Like all citizens of high public ideals, Lowell was inevitably a public critic and censor, but he was much too good a Yankee not to comprehend the practical conditions of political life in this country. No man understood better than he such truth as lies in John Morley's remark: "Parties are a field where action is a long second best, and where the choice constantly lies between two blunders." He did not therefore conclude that there is no alternative, that "naught is everything and everything is naught." But he did see clearly that while the government of a republic must be a government of

party, yet that independence of party is much more vitally essential in a republic than fidelity to party. Party is a servant of the people, but a servant who is foolishly permitted by his master to assume sovereign airs, like Christopher Sly, the tinker, whom the Lord's attendants obsequiously salute as master :

“Look how thy servants do attend on thee;
Each in his office ready at thy beck.”

To a man of the highest public spirit like Lowell, and of the supreme self-respect which always keeps faith with itself, no spectacle is sadder than that of intelligent, superior, honest public men prostrating themselves before a party, professing what they do not believe, affecting what they do not feel, from abject fear of an invisible fetich, a chimera, a name, to which they alone give reality and force, as the terrified peasant himself made the

spectre of the Brocken before which he quailed. The last great patriotic service of Washington, and none is more worthy of enduring commemoration on this anniversary, was the farewell address with its strong and stern warning that party government may become a ruthless despotism, and that a majority must be watched as jealously as a king.

With his lofty patriotism and his extraordinary public conscience, Lowell was distinctively the Independent in politics. He was an American and a republican citizen. He acted with parties as every citizen must act if he acts at all. But the notion that a voter is a traitor to one party when he votes with another was as ludicrous to him as the assertion that it is treason to the White Star steamers to take passage in a Cunarder. When he would know his public duty, Lowell turned within, not without. He listened,

not for the roar of the majority in the street, but for the still small voice in his own breast. For while the method of republican government is party, its basis is individual conscience and common-sense. This entire political independence Lowell always illustrated. He was born in the last days of New England Federalism. His uncle, John Lowell, was a leader in the long and bitter Federalist controversy with John Quincy Adams. The Whig dynasty succeeded the Federal in Massachusetts, but Lowell's first public interest was the antislavery agitation, and he identified himself with the Abolitionists. He retained, however, his individual view, and did not sympathize with the policy that sought the dissolution of the Union, and which refused to vote. In 1850, he says, in a private letter to his friend Gay, alluding to some difference of opinion with the Antislavery Society, "there has



never been a oneness of sentiment," that is to say, complete identity, "between me and the Society," and a passage in a letter written upon election day in November, 1850, illustrates his independent position: "I shall vote the Union ticket (half Free Soil, half Democratic), not from any love of the Democrats, but because I believe it to be the best calculated to achieve some practical result. It is a great object to overturn the Whig domination, and this seems to be the only lever to pry them over with. Yet I have my fears that if we get a Democratic governor he will play some trick or other. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, if you will pardon stale Latin to Parson Wilbur."

This election is memorable because it overthrew the Whig domination in Massachusetts, and made Charles Sumner the successor of Daniel Webster in the Senate. It restored to the State of Samuel

Adams the same political leadership before the Civil War that she had held before the Revolution. The Republican party, with whose antislavery impulse Lowell was in full accord, arose from the Whig ruins, and whether in a party or out of a party, he was himself the great illustration of the political independence that he represented and maintained. As he allowed no church or sect to dictate his religious views or control his daily conduct, so he permitted no party to direct his political action. He was a Whig, an Abolitionist, a Republican, a Democrat, according to his conception of the public exigency, and never as a partisan. From 1863 to 1872 he was joint editor, with his friend Mr. Norton, of the *North American Review*, and he wrote often of public affairs. But his papers all belong to the higher politics, which are those of the man and the citizen, not of the partisan, a distinction

which may be traced in Burke's greatest speeches, where it is easy to distinguish what is said by Burke, the wise and patriotic Englishman, for such he really was, from what is said by the Whig in opposition to the Treasury Bench.

But whatever his party associations and political sympathies, Lowell was at heart and by temperament conservative, and his patriotic independence in our politics is the quality which is always unconsciously recognized as the truly conservative element in the country. In the tumultuous excitement of our popular elections the real appeal on both sides is not to party, which is already committed, but to those citizens who are still open to reason, and may yet be persuaded. In the most recent serious party appeal, the orator said, "above all things, political fitness should lead us not to forget that at the end of our plans we must meet face

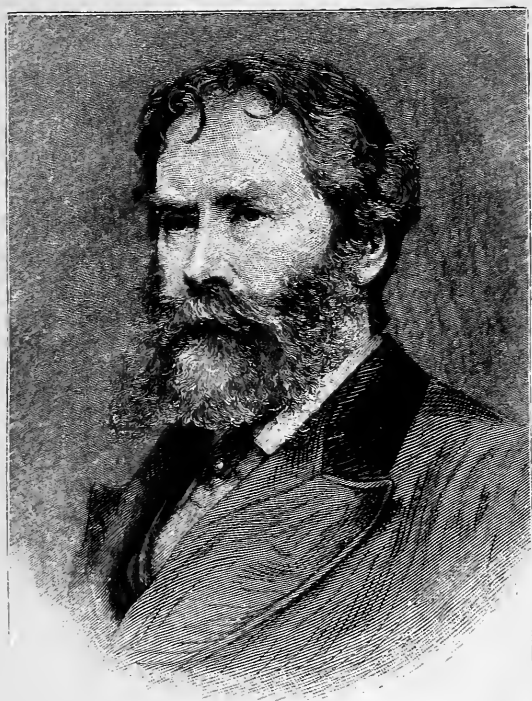
to face at the polls the voters of the land with ballots in their hands demanding as a condition of the support of our party, fidelity and undivided devotion to the cause in which we have enlisted them." This recognizes an independent tribunal which judges party. It implies that beside the host who march under the party color and vote at the party command, there are citizens who may or may not wear a party uniform, but who vote only at their own individual command, and who give the victory. They may be angrily classified as political Laodiceans, but it is to them that parties appeal, and rightly, because except for this body of citizens, the despotism of party would be absolute and the republic would degenerate into a mere oligarchy of "bosses."

There could be no more signal tribute to political independence than that which was offered to Lowell in 1876. He was a

Republican elector, and the result of the election was disputed. A peaceful solution of the difference seemed for some months to be doubtful, although the constitution apparently furnished it, for if an elector, or more than one, should differ from his party and exercise his express and unquestionable constitutional right, in strict accord with the constitutional intention, the threatened result might be averted. But in the multitude of electors Lowell alone was mentioned as one who might exercise that right. The suggestion was at once indignantly resented as an insult, because it was alleged to imply possible bad faith. But it was not so designed. It indicated that Lowell was felt to be a man who, should he think it to be his duty under the indisputable constitutional provision, to vote differently from the expectation of his party, he would certainly do it. But those who

made the suggestion did not perceive that he could not feel it to be his duty, because nobody saw more clearly than he than an unwritten law with all the force of honor forbade. The constitutional intention was long since superseded by a custom sanctioned by universal approval which makes the Presidential elector the merest ministerial agent of a party, and the most wholly ceremonial figure in our political system.

By the time that he was fifty years old Lowell's conspicuous literary accomplishment and poetic genius, with his political independence, courage, and ability had given him a position and influence unlike those of any other American, and when in 1877 he was appointed Minister to Spain, and in 1880 transferred to England, there was a feeling of blended pride and satisfaction that his country would be not only effectively, but nobly repre-





sented. Mr. Emerson once said of an English minister, "he is a charming gentleman, but he does not represent the England that I know." In Lowell, however, no man in the world who honored America and believed in the grandeur of American destiny but would find his faith and hope confirmed. To give your best, says the oriental proverb, is to do your utmost. The coming of such a man, therefore, was the highest honor that America could pay to England. If we may personify America, we can fancy a certain grim humor on her part in presenting this son of hers to the mother-country, a sapling of the older oak more sinewy and supple than the parent stock. No eminent American has blended the Cavalier and the Puritan tradition, the romantic conservatism and the wise radicalism of the English blood in a finer cosmopolitanism than Lowell. It was this generous



comprehension of both which made him peculiarly and intelligently at home in England, and which also made him much more than his Excellency the Ambassador of American literature to the Court of Shakespeare, as the London *Spectator* called him upon his arrival in London, for it made him the representative to England of an American scholarship, a wit, an intellectual resource, a complete and splendid accomplishment, a social grace and charm, a felicity of public and private speech, and a weight of good sense, which pleasantly challenged England to a continuous and friendly bout in which America did not suffer.

During his official residence in England, Lowell seemed to have the fitting word for every occasion, and to speak it with memorable distinction. If a memorial of Dean Stanley were erected in his Chapter House, or of Fielding at

‘ ‘ ‘
‘ ‘ ‘
‘ ‘ ‘
‘ ‘ ‘

Taunton, or of Coleridge at Westminster Abbey, or of Gray at Cambridge, the desire of literary England turned instinctively to Lowell as the orator whose voice would give the best expression, and whose character and renown the greatest dignity, to the hour. In Wordsworth's England, as President of the Wordsworth Society, he spoke of the poet with an affectionate justice which makes his speech, with the earlier essay, the finest estimate of Wordsworth's genius and career ; and of Don Quixote he spoke to the Workingman's College with a poetic appreciation of the genius of Cervantes and a familiarity with Spanish literature which was a revelation to British workmen. Continuously at public dinners, with consummate tact and singular felicity, he spoke with a charm that seemed to disclose a new art of oratory. He did not decline even political speech, but of course in no

partisan sense. His discourse on Democracy at Birmingham, in October, 1884, was not only an event, but an event without precedent. He was the minister of the American republic to the British monarchy, and, as that minister, publicly to declare in England the most radical democratic principles as the ultimate logical result of the British Constitution, and to do it with a temper, an urbanity, a moderation, a precision of statement, and a courteous grace of humor, which charmed doubt into acquiescence and amazement into unfeigned admiration and acknowledgment of a great service to political thought greatly done—this was an event unknown in the annals of diplomacy, and this is what Lowell did at Birmingham.

No American orator has made so clear and comprehensive a declaration of the essential American principle, or so simple

a statement of its ethical character. Yet not a word of this republican to whom Algernon Sydney would have bowed, and whom Milton would have blessed, would have jarred the tory nerves of Sir Roger de Coverley, although no English radical was ever more radical than he. The frantic French democracy of '93, gnashing its teeth in the face of royal power, would have equality and fraternity if every man were guillotined to secure it. The American Republic, speaking to monarchical Europe a century later by the same voice with which Sir Launfal had shown the identity of Christianity with human sympathy and succor, set forth in the address at Birmingham the truth that democracy is simply the practical application of moral principle to politics. There were many and great services in Lowell's life, but none of them all seem to me more characteristic of the man

than when, holding the commission of his country and in his own person representing its noblest character, standing upon soil sacred to him by reverend and romantic tradition, his American heart loyal to the English impulse which is the impulse of constitutional liberty, for one memorable moment he made monarchical England feel for republican America the same affectionate admiration that she felt for him, the republican American. His last official words in England show the reciprocal feeling: "While I came here as a far-off cousin," he said, "I feel that you are sending me away as something like a brother." He died: the poet, the scholar, the critic, the public counsellor, the ambassador, the patriot, and the sorrowing voice of the English laureate and of the English Queen, the highest voices of English literature and political power, mingling with the universal

voice of his own country, showed how instinctively and surely the true American, faithful to the spirit of Washington and of Abraham Lincoln, reconciles and not exasperates international feeling.

So varied, so full, and fair is the story of Lowell's life, and such services to the mind and heart and character of his country we commemorate on this hallowed day. In the golden morning of our literature and national life there is no more fascinating and inspiring figure. His literary achievement, his patriotic distinction, and his ennobling influence upon the character and lives of generous American youth, gave him at last power to speak with more authority than any living American for the intellect and conscience of America. Upon those who knew him well, so profound was the impression of his resource and power that their words must seem to be mere eulo-

gy. All that he did was but the hint of this superb affluence, this comprehensive grasp ; the overflow of an exhaustless supply, so that it seemed to be only incidental, not his life's business. Even his literary production was impromptu. "Sir Launfal" was the work of two days. The "Fable for Critics" was an amusement amid severer studies. The discourse on Democracy was largely written upon the way to Birmingham, Of no man could it be said more truly that

"Half his strength he put not forth."

But that must be always the impression of men of so large a mould and of such public service that they may be properly commemorated on this anniversary. Like mountain summits, bright with sunrise, that announce the day, such Americans are harbingers of the future which shall justify our faith, and fulfil the promise of

America to mankind. In our splendid statistics of territorial extension, of the swift civilization of the Western world, of the miracles of our material invention : in that vast and smiling landscape, the home of a powerful and peaceful people, humming with industry and enterprise, rich with the charm of every climate from Katahdin that hears the distant roar of the Atlantic to the Golden Gate through which the soft Pacific sighs, and in every form of visible prosperity, we see the resplendent harvest of the mighty sowing, two hundred years ago, of the new continent with the sifted grain of the old. But this is not the picture of national greatness, it is only its glittering frame. Intellectual excellence, noble character, public probity, lofty ideals, art, literature, honest politics, righteous laws, conscientious labor, public spirit, social justice, the stern, self-criticising patriotism which

fosters only what is worthy of an enlightened people, not what is unworthy—such qualities and achievements, and such alone, measure the greatness of a state, and those who illustrate them are great citizens. They are the men whose lives are a glorious service and whose memories are a benediction. Among that great company of patriots let me to-day, reverently and gratefully, blend the name of Lowell with that of Washington.

THE END



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 015 762 642 5

